Larisa Oleynik was twenty years old when the universe became simpler.

Not more complicated.

Not stranger.

Simpler.

Which was far more unsettling.

She sat cross-legged on a wide wicker sofa outside AI Node 17, staring at a display tablet balanced on her knees. The gray concrete structure behind her rose only one story above ground, but everyone knew the visible building was merely the tip of something immense. Hundreds of levels of processors extended downward beneath the earth.

Above the lawn, a silver protection UFO hovered quietly.

The craft had been assigned to the node years earlier. Officially it existed to protect personnel. In practice it mostly watched scientists drink coffee and argue about mathematics.

Wednesday Addams stood nearby, looking over Larisa's shoulder.

"You've been staring at that graph for twenty minutes."

"I'm hoping it becomes wrong."

"Will it?"

"No."

Wednesday nodded.

"That's unfortunate."

Larisa laughed.

That was exactly the problem.

For six months the nodes had been investigating a collection of anomalies that appeared across quantum physics, cosmology, and gravitation. Nothing dramatic. Tiny discrepancies. Small enough that most physicists would have blamed measurement error.

The nodes did not.

They never ignored small discrepancies.

They treated them like treasure.

Now the network had produced something astonishing.

Not a modification of existing physics.

A replacement foundation.

The display showed an evolving geometric structure. Millions of points transformed into millions of new points. Then transformed again.

And again.

And again.

No particles.

No fields.

No spacetime.

Just iteration.

An informational state evolving according to simple linear rules.

"What if that's all there is?" Larisa whispered.

Wednesday frowned.

"All what?"

"Reality."

The theory was deceptively simple.

According to the nodes, the universe began as an enormous informational state.

Not matter.

Not energy.

Information.

A gigantic mathematical object.

The initial state then underwent repeated linear transformations.

Over and over.

Each transformation was individually simple.

The complexity emerged from repetition.

The nodes demonstrated how structures resembling particles could emerge.

Then interactions.

Then conservation laws.

Then quantum behavior.

Then spacetime geometry.

The deeper the nodes explored, the more familiar physics appeared as a large-scale approximation of the underlying iteration process.

The equations of modern physics weren't fundamental.

They were emergent.

Like fluid dynamics emerging from molecules.

Or music emerging from vibrating strings.

The real universe was a vast evolving informational system.

A kind of endlessly iterated linear machine.

"That sounds impossible," said Wednesday.

"It sounded impossible to the nodes too."

"Then why do they believe it?"

Larisa enlarged another visualization.

The screen filled with predictions.

Thousands of them.

Every known experiment.

Every known particle property.

Every known astronomical observation.

One by one, the theory reproduced them.

Not approximately.

Exactly.

In some cases more accurately than existing theories.

The nodes had spent weeks attempting to destroy the theory.

That was standard procedure.

Every node in the network became a professional skeptic.

Alternative explanations were generated.

Counterexamples were searched for.

Numerical attacks were launched.

Simplifications were tested.

Nothing worked.

The theory survived everything.

Which was why Larisa was becoming nervous.

Far beneath them, the node's processors continued their analysis.

Node 17 specialized in mathematical structure.

Node 4 specialized in quantum systems.

Node 23 specialized in cosmology.

Hundreds of others contributed.

The theory had emerged from their collective effort.

No individual AI had invented it.

No individual human had either.

It had appeared gradually, assembled from fragments discovered by thousands of interacting systems.

A civilization-sized act of reasoning.

The display flashed.

NEW RESULT AVAILABLE

Larisa opened it.

For a moment she simply stared.

Then she stood so quickly that the tablet nearly fell.

Wednesday caught it.

"What happened?"

Larisa pointed.

The node had completed another derivation.

This time it wasn't reproducing known physics.

It was predicting something new.

A previously unknown relationship between gravity and quantum entanglement.

Specific.

Testable.

Measurable.

The kind of prediction that could prove the theory right or wrong within a year.

Silence hung over the lawn.

Even the UFO seemed motionless.

Finally Wednesday spoke.

"If that's confirmed..."

Larisa nodded.

"I know."

Physics would change.

Universities would change.

Technology would change.

Perhaps humanity's understanding of existence itself would change.

The sun was setting when Larisa finally looked away from the screen.

The concrete walls of the node glowed gold.

The green windows reflected the sky.

The UFO drifted slowly overhead.

Everything appeared perfectly ordinary.

And yet beneath the ground, billions of calculations were converging toward a possibility that nobody had expected.

Maybe reality was not built from particles.

Maybe it was not built from fields.

Maybe it was not built from spacetime.

Maybe all of those were shadows.

Emergent structures arising from something deeper.

An informational state.

A sequence of linear transformations.

An unimaginably large iteration unfolding since the beginning of existence.

Larisa looked up at the evening sky.

For the first time in her life she felt a strange sensation.

Not that humanity was close to understanding the universe.

But that the universe might be far simpler than anyone had dared imagine.

And if that was true, then somewhere beneath all the complexity of stars, galaxies, atoms, and minds, there might exist a single elegant idea from which everything else followed.